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SUBJECT: SOFT POWER IN ACTION: MOSCOW PROMOTES RUSSIAN
LANGUAGE REVIVAL

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Moscow has ramped up its efforts to promote the Russian language in both the former Soviet Union and throughout the world. Observers say the program is aimed at using "soft power" to maintain Russia's dominance in its neighborhood and underline that Russia remains a great power.

At a May 29-30 MFA-hosted conference on the status of the Russian language abroad, participants -- including ethnic Russians from Moldova and Ukraine -- announced plans to appeal to the European Union to protect the rights of Russian speakers in member states. Experts believe the GOR effort could cause friction with some of its neighbors, given political sensitivities over the use of local languages in the post-Soviet space. Economic and social factors are the key elements in promoting and maintaining a language, and the GOR's efforts might not be enough, said critics. At the same time, the economic dependence on Russia of many of Moscow's neighbors, as well as a significant Russian diaspora, will aid Moscow's efforts. End Summary.

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HIGH LEVEL BOOST

¶2. (SBU) With much fanfare and continuing highly visible participation by President Putin, Mrs. Putin, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev and FM Lavrov, the Russian government is commemorating 2007 as "The Year of Russian Language." The goal of the program is to promote usage of the Russian language in former Soviet republics and throughout the world, as a way to foster a positive image of Russia abroad and increase Moscow's influence -- particularly in neighboring states with significant ethnic Russian populations. Russian literature, poetry, language and culture are being promoted through a series of book fairs, seminars, poetry readings, and round table discussions. The GOR plans to hold about 900 Russian language-related events and projects in 76 countries, in the areas of culture, science and education, according to Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Yakovenko. One of the highlights of the year thus far was a May 29-30 conference hosted by the MFA on the status of the Russian language abroad. Conference participants -- including ethnic Russians from Moldova and Ukraine -- announced plans to appeal to the European Union to protect the rights of Russian speakers in member states.

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SOFT POWER

¶3. (SBU) Yuriy Ivanov, Deputy Director for the MFA's Department for Compatriots, explained to us that the primary focus of the program was on the countries of the former Soviet Union, but stressed that events would also take place in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere. The MFA has the lead in organizing the events, but the Ministry of Education will assist by printing and distributing school textbooks at Russian educational centers in the former Soviet

Union. In addition, the GOR is establishing cultural and information centers in many neighboring states. "One of our goals is for Russian to remain the primary language of communication in the former Soviet Union," Ivanov said. Observers we spoke to characterize this effort as a another means to capitalize on the soft power inherent in the widespread use of Russian in the former Soviet Union to maintain Moscow's influence in the region.

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DECLINE OF THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

14. (SBU) Moscow's effort to revive Russian language use has been driven by concerns about the decline in the number of Russian speakers abroad since the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to experts. Former Warsaw Pact countries quickly shed Russian language requirements in schools. Many countries in the developing world that once had close ties to the Soviet Union no longer encourage Russian language study, and the number of foreign students who received scholarships to study in Russian universities dropped off precipitously. In many former Soviet republics, use of the local language was promoted as a symbol of independence and Russian is often no longer a state language. Many of the elites in these countries now opt for English as a more useful second language for international business and discourse.

15. (SBU) Demographics is also a factor in the number of Russian speakers worldwide, with about 700,000 Russian speakers dying each year. According to GOR figures, there are an estimated 160 million native Russian speakers in the world, plus another 125 million who use Russian as a secondary language. For now, Russian is perhaps the fifth most spoken language in the world, behind Chinese, English, Spanish, and Arabic, according to the MFA's Ivanov, but by

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2025, it could slip to 10th place. (Note: Language rankings are notoriously difficult to determine, and other sources place the number of Russian speakers behind those of Hindi, Portuguese and Bengali, as well, but no source suggests much growth in the number of Russian speakers.)

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UNDER ATTACK?

16. (SBU) Fears about the declining use of Russian and what that represents for Moscow's influence is most acute when the GOR looks at Russia's neighborhood. Aleksandr Chepurin, Director of the MFA Department for Compatriots, complained publicly that the Russian language was under attack in many former Soviet republics. "The scaling down of the use of Russian language in these countries is noted in such fields as education, the mass media and records management," Chepurin said recently during an ITAR-TASS interview. Ivanov told us that the governments in many of these countries, such as Moldova, Latvia and Estonia, actively work to minimize the use of Russian language. The number of schools that conduct classes solely in Russian has dropped by 71 percent in Turkmenistan, 65 percent in Moldova, 59 percent in Kazakhstan and 47 percent in Uzbekistan, said Dmitry Shilankov, Deputy Head of the MFA's Russian Center for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation. One small, but telling example of the declining use of Russian that was cited to us was Tajik President Rakhmonov's March decision to drop his Russianized name and be known henceforth by the Tajik version, Emomalii Rakhmon.

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COMPATRIOTS

17. (SBU) Given these fears, a key target of the MFA's program is the estimated 17 million ethnic Russians living outside the Russian Federation in former Soviet republics, according to the MFA. Putin has made it a priority to strengthen ties between Russia and its ethnic-Russian

"compatriots" living in neighboring countries. In March, the first session of the Coordination Council of Russia Compatriots was held. Promoting Russian language was a top priority at the session, Shilankov said. He reflected the views of many Russians in seeing the historic spread of Russian political power, culture, and the Russian language as a positive, "civilizing" influence. "Of course we don't want to force anyone to learn Russian, and we don't want them to do it at the expense of their own native languages, but there are a lot of ethnic Russians who need our help to maintain their identity," he said.

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POLITICAL MOTIVES

18. (SBU) Eduard Ivanyan, of the USA-Canada Institute, told us that the GOR's efforts are aimed at more than just cultural goals. "The Kremlin is doing this because they want to re-establish political influence in the region," he said. Putin sees ethnic-Russians in Ukraine or Kazakhstan as potential advocates for Russian policy. The decline of Russian language and culture in the former Soviet Union was a wound to Russian prestige. While the Soviet Government's efforts to promote the Russian language varied in intensity, there was a long term commitment to establishing Russian as the language of government and power. Now that Russia feels that is back on its feet, the GOR wants to rebuild its prestige. Perhaps reflecting Russia's aspirations more than present day reality, DFM Yakovenko announced that "the higher demand for Russian language as a means of international communication has to do with the rising authority of Russia as a political, economic and cultural pole in the contemporary world."

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POSSIBLE RESISTANCE

19. (SBU) The initiative would likely cause suspicion and resistance in some neighboring republics, Ivanyan noted. Many of Russia's neighbors harbor suspicions toward Russia because of its imperial past -- both during Czarist and Soviet times. Promoting Russian language more aggressively could be seen by some as undermining national identity, no matter how gingerly Russia approaches the project. "The Latvians and Estonians have been working for more than a decade to re-establish their languages and redress the demographic imbalance that occurred as a result of the Soviet occupation," he said. "They will not appreciate efforts to undo that." Confrontation could occur, resulting in a deterioration of relations with some neighbors, Ivanyan said. During a recent round table discussion in May, participants

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discussed efforts to preserve Russian culture and language in the mostly Russian-speaking Crimean region of Ukraine. During the discussion, Ivan Demidov, head of United Russia's youth wing, urged a greater emphasis on street agitation to get the message out. He said his movement had strong connections with the pro-Russian Party of Regions in Ukraine, and that it would not be difficult to cover Crimea with "Let's Support Russian Language" stickers. Under these circumstances, things could get out of hand, Ivanyan said.

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NOT ENOUGH?

110. (SBU) Ivanyan said that government efforts to boost the Russian language are not enough to ensure success. The collapse of Soviet political power and the resulting decline of Russian culture outside of Russia was the result of economic and social circumstances that were beyond the control of any one government. "I don't believe in campaigns, and this strikes me as a big bureaucratic campaign. It is a Soviet-style approach," Ivanyan said. Many Russians living abroad will continue to use Russian as their native language. Continued Russian economic growth,

and the ability to keep former Soviet republics economically reliant on Russia are more important factors, he said. The hundreds of thousands of non-Russians who work in Russia as construction laborers or traders promote Russian language far more effectively than book fairs and poetry readings, Ivanyan added.

¶11. (SBU) The MFA's Shilankov argued that the language effort would get a boost from Russia's positive economic trends and Moscow's greater international prominence. "People will see very concrete reasons why it would benefit them to learn or maintain Russian." He pointed to recent press reports that Russian language studies have seen an increase in Poland. Poles by and large stopped learning Russian after the collapse of communism. But Russia's economic growth and the desire for Western companies to invest there have made Russian language skills more important in the region, he said. He said the Russian Cultural Center in Warsaw claimed a 35 percent increase in the number of Poles enrolling in Russian language classes.

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COMING SOON TO A CULTURAL CENTER NEAR YOU

¶12. (SBU) Russian officials are also promoting the language beyond the neighborhood. Millions of people speak Russian as a first language in Israel and the United States, Ivanov said. Additionally, the GOR plans promotional events in countries without a significant ethnic-Russian population, such as Indonesia, Mexico and Hungary. During the Cold War, many people throughout the world learned Russian. For some, it was the result of curiosity about the "enemy," Ivanov said. For others, it was because of the Soviet Union's strength and influence -- especially in the Third World. The GOR would like to re-establish Russian as a language of science and diplomacy, Ivanov said.

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COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) Russia's efforts to re-establish and maintain Russian as the lingua franca of the former Soviet Union will benefit from its neighbors' strong economic ties to Russia. Additionally, Russian ethnic populations abroad have not lost their identity, and will continue to speak Russian for the foreseeable future, but these are populations in decline. The political sensitivity of language and national identity, combined with historic mistrust among many of Russia's neighbors regarding its motives, will undoubtedly hamper Russia's efforts. In the end, the success or failure of efforts to increase the number of Russian speakers will depend most on whether neighbors see a practical reason to learn or maintain their Russian language skills.
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